

NATURE-BASED TOURISM

Issue Brief #1

Office of Sustainable Ecosystems & Communities
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

Introduction

Nature tourism is travel and recreation for the appreciation of nature and the outdoors. Areas that attract nature tourists range from pristine wilderness to community parks. Economic benefits of nature tourism accrue to those in a community who provide goods and services to tourists. Properly planned and managed, nature tourism can have minimal impacts on the environment, protect and enhance social and cultural values, and enhance the economic well-being of residents. Proper planning and a clear understanding are needed for a community to develop a nature tourism industry that protects the natural resources upon which their livelihood depends. "Ecotourism" is defined as travel and recreation to natural areas that is designed to contribute substantially to those areas' conservation and enhancement, through education and the dedication of tourism dollars to protect natural resources. Ecotourism is a relatively small component of the total nature tourism industry, but is growing rapidly.

Breadth of Nature Tourism Activities

The fastest growing nature tourism -- growing 30% annually -- involve nonconsumptive activities: bird and other wildlife watching, hiking and backpacking, nature study and photography, boating, biking, camping and picnicking, and allied activities.

76.5 million Americans enjoy viewing wildlife, and 24.7 million observe and/or feed birds.

In 1991, Americans spent:

- \$4.4 billion for food and lodging to view nonconsumptive wildlife
- \$198 million for guide services and \$88.6 million for equipment rentals
- \$5.7 billion for nonconsumptive equipment expenditures

Camping, hiking, backpacking, and boating are enjoyed by tens of millions of Americans.

There are 35.6 million American anglers and 14.1 million hunters.

Nature tourism and recreation generates over \$20 billion in economic activity and 234,000 jobs

Localized Studies of Expenditures by Nature Tourists in Communities

A 1993 study in Texas found that a typical American birdwatcher spends nearly \$700 in the State on a vacation, and foreign tourists each spend nearly \$1,900. Another study of ten National wildlife refuges in 1993-94 estimated direct annual expenditures in surrounding communities by visitors:

National Wildlife Refuge Visitors/yr. Local expenditures Avg. visitor's local spending

Chincoteague (VA) 95,970 \$9.71 million \$62 - \$101

Salton Sea (CA) 60,000 \$3.1 million \$38 - \$57

Santa Ana (TX) 99,000 \$14.42 million \$88 - \$145

Bosque del Apache (NM) 90,788 \$3.3 million \$25 - \$37

Quivira (KS) 27,855 \$636,000 \$29 - \$37

Laguna Atascosa (TX) 82,000 \$3.98 to \$5.63 million \$83 - \$117

Magee Wildlife Mgmt. 432,722 \$5.61 million \$21 - \$29

Mgmt./Ottawa (OH)

Edwin B. Forsythe (NJ) 130,000 \$4.01 million \$25 - \$41

Help for Communities and Entrepreneurs

A multitude of resources are available to local governments, communities, tourism business entrepreneurs, nongovernment organizations, and concerned communities who want to develop and promote nature-based tourism. Planning and technical assistance are available to help develop nature tourism plans from, for example:

State nature tourism associations

State Sea Grant Programs

State universities, departments of recreation, parks, economics, and hotel management

State parks and fish and wildlife departments

National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior

United States Tourist Council

Other communities who can share their experiences promoting nature tourism

County and regional vacation and tourism bureaus
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's refuges (visitation data and some expenditure data)
Tourism Policy Council, U.S. Department of Commerce

Community tourism promoters need to evaluate natural resources in an area and find what is special locally, and market those special resources. A community must have a plan to protect their resources before they use them, or risk destruction of the resources which attract tourists. For example, some counties and other jurisdictions in the western United States have found it beneficial to protect recreation and wildlife lands using tax dollars to enhance the quality of life and promote nature tourism in fast-growing places such as Jefferson and Boulder Counties, Colorado; Kings County (Seattle), Washington; and Flagstaff, Arizona. Community tourism promotion activities have been successful that specifically attract certain types of recreation users -- birdwatchers, for example -- by printing guides with suggestions for finding species, maps of the area, and lodging/food establishments. Birdwatching festivals have increased dramatically in the last decade across the country, capitalizing on local species and phenomena (e.g., crane migration in Nebraska, shorebird migration on the coasts, and songbirds throughout the country). Many coastal communities on both coasts and Alaska and Hawaii have promoted tourism based on marine (whales/mammals, sea birds) and shoreline (e.g., shorebirds and scenery) resources.

Some Examples of Natural Resources That Attract Nature Tourists

- An old-growth or other healthy forest
- A marsh, swamp, or bog
- A scenic river or other corridor trail
- A mountain landscape with trails
- A cave that can be opened to visitors
- High biodiversity, particularly birds
- Open space and other parks
- Healthy grassland or prairie
- Geologic features
- Whitewater for boating and related recreation
- Whales and other large mammals

The Potential Pitfalls of Nature Tourism and How to Avoid Them

Nature tourism activities, even with proper management and government

institutions, can and do damage natural resources. The management objectives of nature tourism include minimizing those damages. Popular sites often are overused and degraded. As a result, they can lose many ecological functions and amenities, such as wildlife and their habitats, that made them destinations in the first place. Many National, State, and other parks, wilderness areas, and other public lands and waters experienced such overuse and deterioration of recreation and other values. Improper location and design of tourism development have destroyed beaches and dunes, ruined scenic views, and eroded fragile resources. Sprawling housing and commercial development in suburban and ex-urban areas destroy wildlife habitat; the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Science Advisory Board noted in a 1990 report that the destruction of wildlife habitat is one of the most serious ecological problems facing the earth.

To avoid negative community effects and to develop tourism that supports the surrounding human and physical environment, holistic management objectives must be driven by local control of tourism. Tools are needed to assure protection of a community's social, economic, and environmental interests -- land-use restrictions, if necessary; education of tourists/recreation users; restricted numbers of visitors or permit limits for certain types of recreation, if necessary; public ownership or conservation easements on private lands in sensitive areas; special management areas on sensitive public lands; habitat management and protection; and so forth.

Developing a Nature Tourism Industry That Benefits the Community

State and local parks and wildlife management areas can usually be better managed for the enrichment and continuance of wildlife diversity, as well as other public lands (for example, institutional and military properties). Private landowners also can provide habitat protection, and some communities and private organizations offer incentives for that protection (such as conservation easements, special tax treatment, and cost sharing for habitat restoration). Assessing and monitoring the impacts of nature tourism on natural resources also is an important responsibility of nature tourism promoters.

Developing an attractive tourist economy that is part of a community's economic base requires careful planning and coordination among those who design, build, manage, and market natural tourist attractions. The design, planning, and management of tourism facilities have a large impact on how a community is perceived by potential visitors. Vacation service jobs --cooks, maids, waiters --don't pay well, may be seasonal, and do not provide important benefits such as health care insurance. To help residents benefit more from tourism, State and local governments, for example, can promote:

local ownership, management, and operation of small businesses like

bed-and-breakfast places and locally-owned restaurants, guide services, and related tourism service needs.

guidelines for transportation planning, water and energy conservation, and other resource use issues for tourism facilities' development and management that protect local quality of life.

local education on tourism development, such as a training program for community leaders, tourism-related business managers, and prospective business persons; or develop and distribute a nature tourism handbook for communities and landowners that communicates the importance of preserving and managing natural resources.

provide monetary and other incentives to private and public landowners to preserve natural resources and habitats that attract nature tourists.

a marketing strategy that provides centralized access for potential visitors seeking nature tourism and travel information. An inventory of a community's natural, scenic, historic/cultural/heritage, and recreation resources can be an effective way for a community to develop a marketing strategy that celebrates the special appeal of a community. Using existing infrastructure, a community can evaluate opportunities that already exist to package a marketing strategy that appeals to nature tourists.

Help to Promote, Develop, and Manage Nature Tourism Opportunities

A multitude of resources are available to local governments, communities, tourism business entrepreneurs, nongovernment organizations, and concerned communities who want to develop and promote nature-based tourism. Many sources offer planning and technical assistance to help develop nature tourism plans, and to address management and monitoring concerns. Below is a listing of some sources that were contacted or referenced in preparing materials on nature tourism in the Office of Sustainable Ecosystems and Communities home page.

Federal agencies

Economics Clearinghouse, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the

Interior. Encourages up-to-date information exchange on the economic impacts of rivers, trails, and greenways. Included are case studies, economic impact analyses, benefit and cost estimation techniques, and other reference materials. Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance; National Park Service, Western Region; 600 Harrison Street, Suite 600; San Francisco, CA 94107-1372. Tel. (415) 744-3975.

National Coastal Resources Research and Development Institute. Clemson University's Recreation, Travel and Tourism Institute. Tammy Kibler, Tourism & Business Specialist, South Carolina Marine Extension Program, Room 804, Horry/Georgetown Technical College, 2050 Hwy. 501 East, P.O. Box 1966, Conway SC 29526-1966. Tel. (803) 347-2878.

National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. Examples of support include publications such as Economic Impacts of Protecting Rivers, Trails, and Greenway Corridors: A Resource Book, Fourth Edition (1995) and Guiding Principles of Sustainable Design (sustainability in facility planning and design, useful for ecotourism facilities). National Park Service, Denver Service Center. Rocky Mountain Region; Recreation Grants & Assistance; Division (PL); P.O. Box 25287; Lakewood, CO 80225. Tel. (303) 969-2850. Or contact any recreation planning office in the National Park Service's Regional Offices (Alaska, Mid-Atlantic, Midwest, North Atlantic, Pacific Northwest, Southeast, Southwest, Western, Washington, D.C.).

Nonprofit organizations

The Conservation Fund -- 1800 N. Kent Street, Suite 1120; Arlington, VA 22209. Tel. (703) 525-6300, Fax (703) 525-4610. Helps to protect ecosystems, develop greenways, develop economic assessments for conservation objectives, and other environmental protection activities. Publications and case studies that address the conservation of a variety of natural resources.

Corporation for Enterprise Development -- 777 North Capitol Street, NE, Suite 410; Washington, D.C. 20002. Tel. (202) 408-9788. Conducts economic assessments for communities and helps to develop community development plans. Variety of publications, including case studies.

The Ecotourism Society -- P.O. Box 755; North Bennington, VT 05257. Tel. (802) 447-2121, Fax: (802) 447-2122. The Ecotourism Society is an international nonprofit organization dedicated to finding the resources and building the expertise to make tourism a viable tool for conservation and sustainable development. Pres., Dr. Gerardo Budowski. There is a newsletter, The Ecotourism Society Newsletter. Courses are offered on ecotourism management, including co-presented courses with George Washington University in Washington, D.C., Tourism and Hospitality Management Program. The

courses are for planners, resort owners, managers, tour operators, architects, engineers, and others involved in developing nature tourism facilities. They have courses in investment and financing for sustainable hotels and resorts; and planning, designing, and operating "ecolodges" (that minimize the effects on the local environment and culture as well as being efficient in the use of resources). Publications include: *The Ecolodge Sourcebook for Planners & Developers*, Donald E. Hawkins et al, editors, 1995; and *Ecotourism: An Annotated Bibliography for Planners and Managers*, Third Edition, Paul F.J. Eagles et al., editors, 1995.

Heartland Center for Leadership Development -- 941 O Street, Suite 920; Lincoln, NE 68508. Tel. (402) 474-7667. Programs and publications to help rural communities develop local leadership, including practical resources and policies for the survival of small towns.

Lincoln Institute of Land Policy -- 113 Brattle Street; Cambridge, MA 02138-3400. Tel. (617) 661-3016. Publishes reference materials on land use, public policy, and sustainable development.

National Fish and Wildlife Foundation -- 1120 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 900; Washington, D.C. 20036. Internet homepage is <http://www.nfwf.org>. The NFWF has publications and other information about fish- and wildlife-related recreation, such as the annual directory of birding festivals and other avitourism information, expenditures and visitation data associated with fish and wildlife conservation, and so forth.

The Nature Conservancy, Center for Compatible Economic Development -- 7 East Market Street, Suite 210; Leesburg, VA 22075. The Nature Conservancy evaluates and promotes opportunities for communities to pursue tourism business that is compatible with the conservation of biodiversity and environmental protection.

Rocky Mountain Institute -- 1739 Snowmass Creek Road; Snowmass, CO 80164. Tel. (970) 927-3851. Many publications and reference materials on sustainable economic development, energy efficiency, agricultural policy, and other community development issues.

United States Tourist Council -- Drawer 175; Washington, D.C. 20013-1875. "A nonprofit association of conservation concerned individuals, industries, and institutions who travel or cater to the traveler. Emphasis is on historic and scenic preservation, wilderness and roadside development, ecology through sound planning and education, and support of scientific studies of natural wilderness. Chairman & Executive Director, Stanford West, Ph.D.

Private consultants

FERMATA, Ted Lee Eubanks, President. 2200 Parkway; Austin, TX 78703. Tourism development and environmental consultation.

Dr. Paul Kerlinger. 31 Jane Street, 14D; New York, NY 10014. Environmental and ecotourism consultant.

State and local agencies

County tourism and vacation bureaus. Directors of these organizations actively promote tourism and many are aware of the opportunities for local businesses to profit from nature-based tourism. Contact your local county or State government to find out if there is help to develop and promote nature tourism in your local community.

Flagstaff Open Space & Greenways, City of Flagstaff Planning Division, 211 W. Aspen Ave., Flagstaff, AZ 86001. (602)779-7632

W.F. Harrah College of Hotel Administration, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Box 456023, Las Vegas, NV, 89154-6023. Wesley S. Roehl, Ph.D., organized a recent "Environments for Tourism Conference." Other hotel administration departments in universities also may be a source of information and help for community development of nature tourism opportunities.

State Sea Grant Programs. State Sea Grant programs have programs that promote the wise use of coastal resources to attract nature tourists while promoting sound management practices. South Carolina, for example, has a Nature-Based Tourism Association, South Carolina Marine Extension Program of the South Carolina Sea Grant Consortium.

State and local parks departments and Fish & Wildlife/Game departments typically have data on visitation to area parks and other public lands. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and Texas Department of Commerce have formed a partnership to develop a publication (below) that discusses the opportunities for tourism development and promotion, based on nonconsumptive uses of wildlife and natural resources. The Texas report also prescribes policy needs in the State to better develop nature tourism. Other States may be working on similar programs.

Publications

Anton, John, Caroline Davis, Chuck Teller, and Dr. Edward Bergman, 1993. Eco-tourism in Tyrrell County: Opportunities, Constraints, and Ideas for Action. Prepared by the Institute for Economic Development, University of

North Carolina, Department of City and Regional Planning, February. Prepared for The Conservation Fund, United States Fish and Wildlife Service, Tyrrell County, Town of Columbia, and Tyrrell County Community Development Corporation. 66 pp.

Blank, Uel (no date). The Community Tourism Industry Imperative: the Necessity, the opportunities, its potential. Venture Publications, State College, PA, 200 pp.

Boo, E. 1990. Ecotourism: the Potentials and Pitfalls, Vol. 1. World Wildlife Fund, Washington, D.C.

The Center for Rural Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania Ecotourism: untapped potential, March 1995 (47 pp.).

Petit, D., D. Pressman, and T. Rich, 1995. Breaking Through Boundaries -- Federal Agencies in Flight!", 1994 Annual Report of Partners in Flight.

Sem, John, 1989. Using Tourism and Travel as a Community and Rural Revitalization Strategy. Conference proceedings, Tourism and Travel Workshop, Proceedings of the National Extension Workshop, May 10-12, 1989, Tourism Center, Minnesota Extension Service, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, MN, 215 pp.

Strauss, Charles H., Bruce E. Lord, and Stephen C. Grado, 1995. 1994 Regional Report -- Economic Impact of Travel and Tourism in Southwestern Pennsylvania. School of Forest Resources, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA, July 21, 85 pp. Published by Southwestern Pennsylvania Heritage Preservation Commission, Holidaysburg, PA, John J. York, Marketing Director.

Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and Texas Department of Commerce (no date). Nature Tourism in the Lone Star State -- Economic Opportunities in Nature, A report from the State Task Force on Texas Nature Tourism, 24 pp.

Tibbetts, John, 1995. Nature-Based Tourism, in Coastal Heritage Five-Year Report, Summer 1995, Into the 21st Century: Ensuring South Carolina's Economic Growth & Quality of Life. pp. 16-18.

U.S. Department of Commerce, Tourism Policy Council. Tourism: Putting the Pieces Together. Summarizes the process for developing and implementing a tourism strategy.

If you have questions, or you would like to get more information about this topic and available documents, you may contact Brad Crowder, e-mail address Crowder.Brad@epamail.epa.gov.